Palm Sunday Sermon

Scripture: Matthew 26:14 – 27:66

I always consider Sunday worship as a time of celebration. Indeed every Sunday is a celebration of Jesus’ resurrection, certainly a time a celebrate. Yet in today’s worship service, we have proceeded from the joyful waving of the Palms to the story of Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion, and burial a cold, lonely tomb. How can maintain a celebratory mood when we’re left with such an ending?

A common response to the Passion story is sadness, often paired with the question, “Why did this happen?” It’s tempting to blame the cast of characters operating around Jesus in Jerusalem: Judas Iscariot, the priests, Pontus Pilate, Peter, the angry crowd. Yet I’m certain that if God had postponed Christ’s arrival on this earth for 2000 years, that nothing would have changed, that you and I would have played the part of someone in today’s reading: the jealous leader who considered Jesus a threat or the enthusiastic bystander who was so disillusioned by Jesus’ failure to deliver on our expectations of this Savior, or the faithful disciple who couldn’t quite follow his master all the way to the torture table, or perhaps the admirer who feels her hopes dashed as another good person ends up dying at the hands of those in power who can’t share that power. We might not have been there swinging the whip that tore open Jesus’ flesh, but we might have passively allowed it to happen, or have been caught up in our own interests to care much about it. Those guilty of crucifying Jesus were not just those gathered in Jerusalem on that Friday during Passover, but rather EVERY MAN, WOMAN AND CHILD, PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE. The same impulses that allowed such an event to occur are still alive in each of us today.

And so the question for us becomes, “How do we respond?” We understand that we bear as much guilt for the crucifixion as anyone who was at the scene, and though Easter morning, Resurrection Sunday comes soon enough, how should we handle our own complicity in the murder of God’s son? Is this a time when we should feel the weight of our guilt, the shame of our own violence or fear or indifference? Should we leave today’s service sullen and morose?

Absolutely NOT! The point of our commemorating the Passion of Christ year after year is not to make us penitent and ashamed. That’s not what God desires for you and me. **The crucifixion was God’s plan from the beginning of time**. We had no more power to prevent it than did Peter or Mary Magdalene or King Herod or Pontus Pilate. AND THERE LIES THE WHOLE POINT OF JESUS’ CRUCIFIXION: WE HAD NO CONTROL OVER OUR SIN. WE GIVE OURSELVES FAR TOO MUCH CREDIT IF WE THINK WE COULD HAVE CHANGED THINGS. Jesus died for us BECAUSE HE HAD TO! HE DIED BECAUSE WE COULN’T SET THINGS STRAIGHT. On the cross of Jesus, God’s love is literally poured out on our behalf.

AND THAT SAME LOVING GOD WHO INTENTIONALLY SENDS HIS SON TO SUFFER AND DIE FOR YOU AND ME, BECAUSE HE LOVES US SO DEARLY, HAS NO INTENTION OF PUNISHING US FOR SOMETHING HE HIMSELF HAS ORDAINED. It makes no sense for a loving God to first sacrifice everything for us, then turn around and expect us to grovel and mope and beat ourselves up for the sacrifice that HE FREELY OFFERED. And if we believe that it’s part of our religious duty to beat ourselves up for God’s great sacrifice in Jesus Christ, WE ARE IN ESSENCE REJECTING THE GIFT THAT GOD HAS FREELY OFFERED US. Instead, we’re offering God an exchange: “OK God, since Jesus died for me, I’ll feel ashamed and unworthy, and be miserable when I come to church, and then we’ll be even, right?” Imagine if the prodigal son refuses the love of the father: he returns from his waywardness to a father who runs to greet him, gives him new clothes and throws a party in his honor. But imagine that the son throws off the new robe, refuses to attend his own party, and insists on sleeping in the barn and eating with the pigs. That’s exactly what we do when we beat ourselves up for Jesus’ suffering and death – we reject the greatest gift that God could ever give us. Is that what his father wants? Is the son honoring the father by refusing his grace?

The day that we commemorate Jesus’ crucifixion we call **Good** Friday, and as Christians we should know that it is a very good day. God bought our freedom from our own sin with the blood of his own son. I can imagine no greater act of love than what God has done for you and I through Jesus Christ. And for that, I celebrate, and I rejoice, knowing that God has quite literally saved my life. I was falling through the air without a parachute when Jesus flew by and gave me his.

We place a cross at the front of our sanctuary, and on our necklaces not as a nagging reminder of our sin but as a joyous reminder of Christ’s VICTORY. Christians are the happiest people on earth because we can see the salvation that God has wrought through the glory of the cross. In Holy Communion, the bread and wine serve as reminders of the love that gives us reason to be the most joyful people in the world, people who have experienced the height and width and length and depth of God’s eternal love. Let us celebrate this day, remembering that Christ was given for us, and for that we may honor the Father by rejoicing in His great love that withholds nothing from us. Amen.