

## Holy Week – Palm Sunday

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This morning as much as time allows I want to walk you through holy week. Most Christians tend to jump from the joy of Palm Sunday to the greater joy of Easter morning and skip everything in between and a lot happens in between. In fact, the single most important and the saddest event in the history of God's love happens between those two glorious days.

Sunday, the first day of the week, was the most joyous day of the week or at least it seemed that way to the disciples and the crowds. I'm not sure it was such a joyous event for Jesus himself. Oh sure, he was receiving the accolades of the crowds; they were shouting their Hosannas and proclaiming him as the messiah. I imagine Jesus smiled and waved to the crowds but I'm not sure he felt anything approaching their joy.

Jesus knew that things were going to turn bad before the end of the week. Exactly how much he knew is an ongoing debate among biblical scholars but everyone agrees that he knew things were going to turn bad. In fact many scholars believe that Jesus staged the Palm Sunday parade in order to provoke his enemies. It is fairly obvious Jesus intended for his ride into Jerusalem to evoke the messianic hopes of the people. He knew that with whispered rumors of his messiahship were already circulating that when the people saw him riding along that parade route into Jerusalem on the first day of the week of the Passover that someone would start yelling "Hosanna,

blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” and that others would quickly add their voices. He knew that would get the attention of the Chief Priests and Pharisees and all the other religious folks who wanted to silence him and his message. I think he also knew that when the people started declaring him to be the Messiah he would get the attention of the Roman officials who would move quickly to squelch any hints of another Jewish uprising. After stirring things up he returned to Bethany for the evening. I imagine it was a fitful, perhaps even sleepless, night for him as he anticipated the week.

The next morning he seemed irritable to me. On his way into Jerusalem he saw a fig tree and wanted a few figs. But it was out of season so the tree had no fruit and he cursed the tree. Now a lot of people read all sorts of symbolism in his cursing that tree and I don't deny the symbolism but I also think that Jesus was a little on edge. It wasn't long after that Jesus lost his temper altogether. You remember the incident don't you? Jesus went into the temple and saw the money-changers who were always in the temple doing their job for the Temple. Jesus became furious and started yelling at them and turning over their tables and chasing them out swinging something like a whip, calling them thieves and accusing them of making the temple a den of thieves. That incident provoked the officials even more. But no one challenged him that day. He spent the night in Bethany again.

The next morning, Tuesday, Jesus and his disciples returned to Jerusalem. As they were passing the fig tree Jesus had cursed the day before a disciple noticed that it had withered and asked about it. Jesus explained it was a symbol of what happens when God's people abandoned their faith. He returned to the Temple to teach. No doubt the money-changers were back but he seems to have ignored them and left them alone. The Chief Priests and others were ready for him that day. They had sent some clever folks to spy on him and asked him questions while he was teaching. The plan was to trick Jesus and make him look like a fool in front the crowds. They would embarrass and discredit Jesus and send the “would be” messiah back to his carpenter's shop in Nazareth. But Jesus was too smart for them. They are the ones who ended up looking ignorant and foolish.

After Jesus sent them packing; darkness seems to have come over him; and he made some troubling predictions about Jerusalem and the Temple and his fate and the fate of his followers. Jesus predicted the destruction of the Temple and his own death and he told his followers that for a time they would be universally hated on his account. It was a long day of teaching for Jesus. It was probably the day that the religious officials realized that they would have to get rid of Jesus.

Early Wednesday morning Jesus' enemies began making their plans to eliminate him. They watched Jesus even more carefully, looking for an opportunity to get to bring him down. Jesus knew what they were doing. I suspect the some of the disciples realized how dangerous things were becoming for Jesus. At least one of them, Judas Iscariot, was beginning to have second thoughts, especially when Jesus repeatedly made references to his and their suffering. The breaking point for Judas seems to have come when Jesus was visiting his old friend Simon the Leper.

A woman came in and broke open a jar of very expensive perfume and poured it on Jesus head. Everyone was shocked and someone, some people say it was Judas, complained saying, "What a waste. This perfume could have been sold for a great price and we could have given the money to the poor." Others were angry at the woman and wondered why Jesus had not stopped her. But Jesus defended the woman and said a very strange thing, a very disturbing thing. He said, "You will always have the poor with you, and you can be kind to them whenever you wish. But you will not always have me." Then he went on to say, "She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial." As Friday drew closer suffering and death were more on his mind.

Shortly after that incident Judas approached the chief priests and offers to betray Jesus. They gladly accepted his offered, promised to pay him well and worked out the details of the capture.

The next day, Thursday, was the first day of Passover and Jesus made plans for his Last Supper with his disciples, although they didn't know it would be their very last supper together.

At the meal Jesus spoke more of his death. He took some bread and shared it with the disciples saying, "Take this and eat. This is my body broken for you." Then he took a cup and handed it to them saying, "This my blood, the blood of the new covenant poured out for many." They all ate and drank, not really knowing what to think. Jesus said, "One of you will betray me." All twelve of them declared their allegiance indignantly saying, "No, not me." Jesus alone knew that Judas was lying.

After supper Jesus told them that they would all desert him in his hour of most urgent need. Once again they all protested and swore their allegiance. But Jesus knew that even the strongest and most loyal of them would briefly turn away in fear.

Jesus went to the garden and prayed, desperately asking to be spared the suffering and cross he knew lie ahead but concluded his prayed, "Nevertheless not my will but thine."

Judas betrayed him with a kiss; Jesus was arrested and led off for a quick religious trial conducted by the people who had orchestrated the whole thing. He was convicted of blasphemy, a capital crime. The verdict was unanimous. Brave faithful Peter was so terrified by the whole thing that he denied even knowing Jesus three times that very night.

Thursday night became Friday morning and Jesus was taken before Pilate for final sentencing. The chief priests could convict someone of a capital crime but they couldn't carry out the punishment. Their Roman overlords kept that power for themselves. Pilate thought Jesus was deluded. He didn't want to sentence him to death. He even offered the crowds a chance to pardon Jesus. Pilate placed Jesus and Barabbas before them and promised to pardon the one they choose. Barabbas was a murderer and a thief, a threat to all decent people. Jesus was the man the crowd had called the Messiah a few days earlier. They chose to spare Barabbas and shouted, "Crucify him" at Jesus.

Jesus could have called on the power that created the universe to save himself but he remained silent. Some the guards mocked Jesus, made a crown of thorns, and forced it into the soft flesh of his head. They beat him and paraded him through the streets. At the place called the skull they nailed him to the cross and the crowds jeered at him as he died.

Jesus never stopped loving human beings. Even as he was dying he prayed for the forgiveness of everyone there, those who had betrayed and deserted him, those who turned on him and mocked, those who were executing him, even those who plotted his murder.

“Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” We cling to those words because we know that from that terrible place he was praying for us and dying for us out of God’s incredible love for us.

On that first Good Friday no one except Jesus knew that death would not hold him. So all his followers and friends and all his executioners and enemies and all those who shout “Hosanna” along with all those who shouted “Crucify him” when home thinking he was dead and that that was the end of him.

But of course they were wrong. But that’s a sermon for next week. This week especially as we come to the table this evening and hear the words, “This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you.” let’s pause at the cross and think about the wondrous love of God that was lived out there.

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